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FRANCESCA  
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# FRANCESCA OF RIMINI.

A P O E M.

BY A. S. H. *Hardy*



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## FRANCESCA OF RIMINI.

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### I.

A WESTERN shore and marshy plain between,  
Girt by a crumbling wall, a city stands  
Alone. Men say there was none other seen  
So joyous or so fair, in all those lands,  
When decked as for a bride by royal hands,  
Her excellence was as some jewel rare,  
That many crowns had coveted to wear.

Like to a brilliant bound about her brow,  
    Upon the darkening waters blazed her light,  
For those who watched about the spray-wet brow,  
    To catch its distant flashings through the night;  
Or safe within her circling arms, the white  
Ships slept with folded wings, a happy hour  
At rest from baffling winds and Thetis' power.  
  
But drifting sands have shut her from the sea,  
    Whose murmuring waters washed erstwhile her  
        feet,  
And cool dim woods are stirred with melody  
    Of birds, that flit and call, and answer sweet  
From moss-hid nests, where wrathful surges beat

Before, and sea-birds, circling slantingwise,  
Dipped down the yellow surf with shrilly cries.

Forgotten now of emperor and king,—

Yet as the incense o'er the altar waits,  
Though long ago the censer ceased to swing,—

A legendary light illuminates  
Her silent palaces, whose empty gates,  
Forsaken of their guests, no hand again  
Shall ever ope to sun or bar to rain.

And save that shrine of him, the bard divine,  
No good thing tempts the pilgrim's wandering  
way

Within her narrow streets ; no longer shine  
The lights of midnight revel,—all the gay  
And happy songs are dead upon her gray  
Still lips, that fortune, fickle lover, oft  
In other days had thrilled with kisses soft.

Nor aught is heard of music in her streets,  
Save here perchance a maiden singing o'er  
Her work : the pulse of life responsive beats  
No more to stirring sounds of peace or war,  
For this the peace that dwells within her  
door  
Is that which hovers o'er the chilling clay  
Ere yet the spirit passeth quite away.

## I I.

Now in that long gone time of which men tell,

Within a smiling chamber, where the rays

Of loving suns last lingered and first fell,

A maiden stands, and looks with dreamy gaze

Across the sunclad sea, and level lays,

That stretch beneath the lattice window wide,

In the still sleep of summer eventide.

Nor sees the purple haze upon the height,

The curved-horned cattle browsing on the downs,

The slim acacia-hedges, flowering white

In slender lines between the gray-walled towns,

The grain-fields gilding their tiara crowns

Where first the river, winding wearily,  
Tastes the salt kisses of the waiting sea.

Her wide soft eyes looked out beyond the rim  
Of hill and sea, as to some far land green  
With spring, where, revery leading, made them  
dim

With happy tears too shy to fall, or e'en  
Some wondrous note of sweetness unforeseen  
Had wakened in the heart that, half afraid,  
Enraptured heard the song itself had made.

And dreaming still, till all the mellow flood  
Of color touched and vanished as a cry

Beyond the vineyard-terraced hills, she stood

As in a vision ; and across the sky

The white moon, stately as a princess, high

Amid a thousand stars, moved silently,

Her silver trailing dress upon the sea :

Then folded up her dream in her deep heart,

And waking, blushed to know it hidden there.

For Guido, Lord of Cervia, apart,

In suddenwise, within his daughter's hair

Had set a blossom only one may wear :

And all the day as one who slept and dreamed,

And waked to dream her dream again, she

seemed.

And all the day a wistful yearning, sweet

And pitiful, alas ! and sharp surprise,

And timid dread of that she would not meet

Yet would not lose, was mingled in her eyes,

Hope answering to fear in soft replies.

O little Heart ! that throbs and beats, who may

Translate thy music or thy tumult weigh !

Within the sunny garden of her life,

Where only murmuringwise upon her ears

Fell undiscerned the turmoil of men's strife,

What should she know of all the sin and

tears

That stain the purple raiment of the years ;



Of love made loathing, and of mocked desire,  
Of mould within the seed, that wastes as fire

Erewhile it blooms, of all the ills that blight

Ere foolish hope be wholly turned to scorn,

The little space and span of man's delight.

For in her heart each image fair was born,

As flowers, standing in the doors of morn,

Ere yet the lurking shadows, one by one,

Gather and deepen in the noontide sun.

So must it be,—for if to him who first

The toilsome way begun, were told the sin,

The pain, the shame, the hunger and the thirst,

How should he dare the journey to begin!

How would he rather choose again to win

That rest serene, whence coming, man but may

Return, nor break its slumber by a day!

### III.

Divided then was all that land. Within

Her door the good wife trembling saw afar

The flash of shields. A little gold to win

The sword was drawn, nor loth were hands to mar

What lips had sworn. And Guido, long at war,

And fearing oaths but lightly pledged, would fain

With holier vows the new-made truce maintain.

But one whose crafty counsel in the things

Of state he sought, made answer thus: "Beware,

O friend, of this that thou wilt do. The wings

Of love are strong and free, and were he heir,

This Malatesta lord, to virtues rare

As brilliants chosen for a royal crown,

Well at their setting might a maiden frown.

"Now if this man she see, nor I, nor thou,

Shall move her mind to wed with him. But

let

His brother Paulo come to take the vow,

That thus a maiden's fancies may not set

At naught thy pleasure, and new perils yet

The state assail." And thus unwittingly

Came Paulo, with a goodly company,

And gifts, the lily of the land to wed.

And so it happened that as down the street

That 'neath the palace windows winding led,

With tumult of men's voices and the feet

Of horses, passed the train, in shy retreat,

Francesca, with her maids, behind the half

Closed lattice stood. To whom with merry

laugh

One said: "Lo, lady, this is he, thy lord."

Who, when with timid wondering to prove

Her dreams, she saw him thus in such accord

Therewith, straightway from that time forth her  
love

In him she placed, nor knew what snare was wove  
About her way, nor dreamed that love made sin  
Should all the song make mute her heart within.

Full oft the perfect gift of happy days,

That dazzling pass as stars across our sky,  
Is the sweet after-thought, that still delays

When low the stars 'neath the horizon lie,

And all the tumult of our joy 's gone by.

Below the world's far edge dips from our view  
The sun, but leaves behind his softest hue.

So in some twilight chamber of our lives,  
Oft watch we peaceful with a memory  
Sweet as the long passed rapture it survives.  
And oft Francesca in the days to be,  
Should clothe herself again in fantasy,  
With robes of white and pearls, oft hear again  
The dim vaults echo back the deep refrain  
  
Of chanting choir, should feel anew the faint  
Breath of the censer steal, a holy spell,  
About her soul, and feign the sweet constraint  
That mingled with the joy she could not  
tell  
The rapture of a kiss might but dispel.

Beneath the gate's wide span, where overhead,  
Half white on field of azure, and half red

On field of gold, the eagle shone, oft should

She pass, and with her lover seek anew

The selfsame fields and summer-scented wood

That once before, with merry retinue

Of laughter and of song, they journeyed

through,

Till, counting thus of bliss her little store,

She comes, as on that festal night, once more

The wonder of all eyes, girt round with praise.

The circling sheen of pearls upon her bare

White throat, as 'twere not tinted by the rays  
Of southern suns, and yellower her hair  
Than was the golden fillet twining there ;  
And in her face a light divine, as one  
Who called of Heaven knows her refuge won.

And long they say throughout that land was  
told

How unto men she came, a breath of some  
Forgotten sweetness lost to life grown old ;  
A glimmer of the dawn and fields abloom,  
To light within the heart's long darkened room  
The faces of the dead, that moulder not  
As things of earth, but slumbering, forgot



Of men, wait for the issue of the night.

O life ! that hath for love so little ruth ;—

For love is more than life, though life should blight

All sweet false dreaming with its bitter truth,

And all that makes the paradise of youth,

Dissolve as clouds, that gild the morning's train

With golden fleece, to melt at night in rain.

And all that night, though love were slain, the

sea

Played with the shadows of the stars, heedless

The nightingale his midnight melody

Outpoured, and through the summer quietness,

Unbroken, save where in the bay's recess,

Secure at last, the weary boatmen furled  
With song their glistening sails, slept on the world.

*High up the mountain slope,  
The frailest blossoms ope  
To morning dew, and hide in rest  
At night upon the crater's breast.*

*Close in the narrow path,  
That no side turning hath,  
A shining angel waits, nor saith  
To him who comes, My kiss is death !*

## I V.

Though in its circuit summer wind should see

The death of summer flowers, it would not stay ;

Beneath the winter snow, as joyously

The river runs as when, in time of May,

The grasses stooped to hear what it should say.

In bright dim gates of birth alone a cry

Is born, and in the gates of death a sigh,

That with the voice of Nature has no kin ;

There is no place in all her wide domain

For one regretful tear ; only within

The spirit infinite is room for pain.

So stir of life no heaviness can chain,

And softly coming dawn returned, and dumb  
Night, waking, broke anew in song. So come

The days as women beautiful in dreams :

Each with her handmaids two,—sweet Joy, whose  
smile,

Bespeaking unto men heaven's pity, seems

To wrap the world in peace, as seas the isle :

But in her shadow, as a veil the while,

Walks Sorrow, silent and unseen of all,

Save those on whom perchance her sad eyes fall.

Day follows hard the night. The rocks make haste

To clothe a little while their barren breasts ;

The buds swell swiftly, for the winds that waste  
Are stirring in the north. A thousand nests  
Are building fast, wherein a new world rests  
But so to gain a little strength of wing,  
To follow on the footsteps of the spring.

So swift the whirling wheel it seems to stand :  
Each broken life, as dreams that caught in  
sleep  
Still go before, weaves on the endless strand.  
Men listen for the voice of them that weep,  
But still and smooth as waters where they leap  
The gulf, the flowing sea gives back no sound ;—  
Not yet the secret told, the answer found.

For this the gods are kind, that men may see

Some footprints on the sliding sands of space,

But not the wondrous feet :—some shadows flee

As clouds that pass above and leave no trace,

Some far-off light, but not the hidden face :

May catch some dim strange strain no waiting ear

May understand, for this the gods are dear.

V.

Rich food for many tongues that bridal proved,

For straightway knew all men how she was wed

To Guanciotto, and not him she loved.

And if some hearts awhile sweet pity led,

As little waves, stirred in their shallow bed

Alike by breeze and tempest, soon are still,  
So scarce a day such things their hearts did fill.

For cruel waking on that morn she had,  
When first her husband's face with shrinking eyes  
She knew, and 'gan within her heart once glad  
With all the merry world might bring, to rise  
A loathing fear of that she fain would prize,  
And from the fields above, the waters all  
So sweet unto her lips, seemed touched with gall.

"Ah me!" she cried, "that I may finish fast  
The bitter draught life's narrowing rim clasps  
round,

And so that pearl of peace I gain at last,

That not in all the flowers its margin bound,

But only in its dark drained depth is found."

Strange ! how each one some time upon life's way,

How fair soever then it be, how gray

Soe'er it stretches to the mist-hung west,

Knows well that there within the dusk, not here,

Though fair sky stoop to fairer fields, is rest.

Intent on matters to his heart more dear

Than woman's love, her lord, they say who near

These twain were, might not know a woman's  
need;

He saw her face, yet seeing might not read,



Her scorn, but not her tears. "Forsooth, she hath  
    Been overreached," he said, "the jewelled store  
Of Malatesta's bride will stay the wrath  
    Of her soft eyes." And jesting lightly o'er  
    A maiden's fancies, soon the brief days wore  
That he should tarry with her, and anon  
To a far land he governed he was gone.

So seemed the worst thing done; and summer  
    wrought  
    From hill to belt of sea its dress of green,  
And to that land glad gifts the autumn brought.  
    Yet had the lapse of hours no spell to wean  
    Her sad, enduring thought from what had been.

Above her golden cushion still she hears  
The pulse of love, and broiders only tears.

No idle talk of maids might mar for her

The dream that in her lute's low music fled,  
Of what should be, when from the sepulchre

The stone were rolled, and Love were in Fate's  
stead.

Haply within the awful hush of dead  
Desires, when men no longer fain would know  
Whither at night the red suns silent go,

Some peace, a peace of vanished hopes, may hide.

But solitude for her was as the breath

Of spring to quicken what perchance had died.—

A tomb wherein as one none comforteth,

She entered with the dead and watched with  
death,

And set against her woe the joy she might

Not leave, a thing forgotten in the night.

For though an angel, pleading, to her lips

Had borne a draught so peaceful and so deep

That all her pain had found therein eclipse,

Yet had she deemed it still more sweet to keep

The memories that stirred her troubled sleep

As with the tremor of a kiss, whose thrill

She had not known till lips and heart were still.

For so, scarce conscious of our joy, we wait  
Expectant, looking for some better guest,  
As he who sees the moving clouds too late,  
Alas ! too late, turn golden in the west ;  
Or sudden feels the odorous breath, when pressed  
Beneath his feet, the flower yields at last  
The fragrance round his life it fain had cast.

No more the palace seemed a bridal-place ;  
Masking nor feast Francesca's presence knew ;  
And if some time perchance men saw her face  
When to the garden close she slowly drew,  
Where dark upon the brown moss thickest  
grew

The shade, such trouble seemed thereon to bide,  
As only death within its peace may hide.

Goodly that pleasance was ; its border fringed  
    With yellow grass the sea that ofttimes flung  
Therein the flakes of salt froth, amber tinged,  
    And on the sloping reach of pebbles sung  
The selfsame yearning song, as first among  
The sleeping hills and shallow shining bars,  
Unheard, it whispered to the new-lit stars.

Beyond were shadowed spaces of a wood,  
    Low boughed, where on the river's edge of  
        sand,

Waist-deep and scarcely stirred, the sedges stood,—  
And blossoms, strewn as by a sower's hand,  
Sailed out into the open pasture-land,  
Where like a white arm wound about the lea,  
The river kept the meadows from the sea.

There might she hear, among the wind-blown  
boughs,  
Such sounds as fain would set her feet in  
some  
New place, beyond the far hills' lifted brows,—  
Whereto the limbs above, with gesture dumb,  
Swayed beckoning, and the swift stream cried,  
Come !

And on its bosom floating to the sea

The blossoms answered, Follow, follow me.

O Nature! Sweet to every stricken one,

Thy voices, infinite in harmony,

Chant secret things of peace. And thou alone

Shalt lull to slumber, motherwise, all cry

Of pain, e'en as at last so tenderly

Thou gatherest our honor or our shame

Unto thy silent bosom whence we came.

For though the moaning sea moan not its

dead,

And all the glistening tears about the mound

Of blessed dust are but the cold dew shed  
From out a colder sky, yet have men found  
No waywise voice like to that solemn sound  
Of waves, than the sweet earth no breast  
So soft, whereon to lay their lips at rest.

## VI.

And thus it fell that Paulo from the chase  
Passed in the gloaming of the wood, till through  
The flowering thorn he brake unto a space  
That scarce all day the summer sunshine knew,—  
And sudden as within the place he drew,  
Beheld her first since on that night of shame,  
Girt round with wonder and with praise she came.



Face unto face awhile in the dim wood,

So near that he might see the white pearls rise

And tremble in her loosened gown, they stood,—

Such sudden light within her yearning eyes,

As made those joyless days in some sweet wise

As dreams, of a long-ending night and drear,

That sudden fails from dusk to dawn, appear.

Nay! was it strange his eager hands reached out

Unto his love, unto his sweet, and thus

At last the wasting pain, the fiery drought,

Should cease,—strange that her kind eyes mar-

vellous

Stirred all his heart with longing, tremulous

As fear, pulsing as pain,—that he should buy  
One little hour of love with life and die!

Like the fair blossoming edge of heaven's shore,  
Only a daisied path between lay low ;  
Yet he moved not, for e'en such fear passed  
o'er

Her troubled face as love alone may know,—  
As shrinking back, yet with sad step and slow,  
Pleading yet mute, in the dim shuddering light  
She moved, a fading vision, from his sight.

Long time he stood, yet as one seeing naught  
About him, or how 'gan the day among

The hollows of the hills to sleep. Fulfraught  
With the sweet treasures of far fields, scarce hung  
The bees above the folding flowers, scarce swung  
In topmost branches the hushed nests, and dim  
Were grown the shadows on the river's rim.

But in his ears, though lonesome was the place,  
Were sounds confused of laughter and of mirth,  
And in his eyes a well-beloved face,  
And in his heart, as flowers that have their  
birth

In waste forgotten places of the earth,  
Sweet flickering memories; till once again  
He heard the bridal song, and twain by twain,

Fair hand in hand, the white-clad maids, at last

With lingering steps that scarce the measured  
strain

Might keep, from the bride-chamber slowly passed ;

And with strange shame and fear, sweet unto pain,

He heard soft footfalls of the passing train,

As voice by voice the joyous song decreased,

Until at last footfall and singing ceased,—

Then woke, to hear the unremembering wind

Moan to the river lapping on its shore

Of reeds, and far through gathering mist and blind

Th' incoming sea send sullen answer o'er

Its sands, and waking, knew that evermore

His love the measure of her woe should be,  
The wound that fleeing still she might not flee.

*O Love ! the sea is deep whence thou wast born,  
And in thine eyes betimes such sweet light hides,  
As of dim depths where night and noon are morn ;  
Beneath the bosom of its fitful tides  
Men say indissoluble peace abides,—  
And yet so swift thy shifting lights, ah me !  
Who knows, who knows, if so or no it be ?*

*O Love ! thy crown is laughter, and the foam  
Of sun-loved seas is round thy feet. Thy breath  
Is as the breath of winds that have their home*

*In summer loving lands, forgot of death,—  
Soft winds, that stir the reach of purple heath  
With sighing sounds of restfulness or woe,—  
Ah me ! who knows if so it be or no ?*

*Below the glitter of thy sea, O Love,  
Men say the dead innumerable lie ;  
And that the red rose paler blooms above  
The lonesome grave, and winds that wander by,  
Linger about the home of them that die :  
But thou art glad, as they who no death know,  
Ah me ! who knows if it be so or no ?*

## V I I.

Within the palace is a room beneath

Whose window, at its weary journey's end,

The quiet river sleeps. Their sweetest breath

The distant groves within its lattice send,—

Around its sunny oriel casement bend

The blossoming vines, amid whose moving shades

A woman sits, and weaves her silken braids

In patterns not less delicate than they.

She does not hear without the boatman's song,

Nor yet the oar's soft splash and dripping play,

But oft the pauses of her work among,

Her sad eyes turn to one who reads the wrong

That shamed King Arthur's court. And as the  
strain

Reveals the King, great-hearted, without stain,

She thinks of him, her lord,—not like, ah! no,

Not like to him,—and that for her had been

No happy bowers of Usk or Camelot,

No love, no faith as had that faithless Queen,

But only treachery, and hate between

A pity and a scorn. And in that dumb

Far past she saw again her lover come

With music down the crowded streets, once more

She lived that gala day of joy, and rode



Beside him through the open city door,

As out into a world new made of God.

What cruel way would not her feet, unshod

And bleeding, press, if so she might but gain

At last from mist of tears and fire of pain

But one such day! The children, what a voice

Of merriment was theirs that bridal morn!

What strange new life that bade the world rejoice!

What keener sight, as though Heaven's veil were

torn

And a new Paradise for man were born!

Almost she were content that Queen to be,

If but again such things her eyes might see.

The golden threads lay idle in her hands :—

Full breasted as a flood, whose glistening spray  
Leaves but the wreck within its waste of sands,

So came these memories of another day,

And passed the present woe but to betray.

Poor Heart ! that hadst indeed laid love at rest,

But wrought its tomb within thine own warm breast.

For here it chanced he read of the Queen's smile

When kissed of Launcelot, and reading, still  
Was conscious of her gaze, and felt the while

The subtle spell whose influences thrill

From heart to heart in cunning ways where  
will

Is slave, and lifting from the page apace

His eyes, beheld, alas ! her radiant face.

So moving down that vale, whose end they knew,

Of sweetest flowers and sharpest thorns, came

they

At last thereto ; and waiting Rumor through

The air took wing upon her doleful way.

So, clothed in scorn or pity, shall men say

On thee the blight of Eden too must cling,

O Love ! thou Jester, that wast born a King !

O ye who leave the world a stainless name,

And sitting peaceful on the splendid heights,

Behold it shine amid the years, a flame  
As of the stars, whose everlasting lights  
Burn unexhausted through eternal nights,  
How have ye wrought within life's scanty days  
Of toil, with mortal hands, immortal praise !

O fool ! Here is no marvel ; straight and true  
The slender threads the web of exquisite  
Design run through, or ravelling, all undo.  
And from time's little span, in rhythmic flight,  
The hours rejoin the pulsings infinite,  
With wail discordant, or in melody  
Sweet voiced, as birds that seek the upper sky.





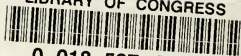








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